

Building better mental health in the construction industry

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Mental health is no longer a topic referred to in hushed tones. Awareness has been growing for a number of years, but 2020 pushed the conversation into the limelight.

Globally, the [construction industry](#) has one of the poorest records for

employee mental [health](#) and suicides. In the UK, for example, about 400 workers in the [construction](#) and engineering sectors take their own lives each year.

The UK's Office for National Statistics reported that the suicide rate in construction is over three times more than the national average and six times more than the rate of falling from height.

At-risk group

In the Middle East and North Africa, the construction workforce is drawn from different geographies. Migrant workers in the UAE, for instance, are mostly from South Asian nations.

Being away from home and familiar surroundings is often daunting, and can lead to loneliness and isolation from family. Workers can feel they do not have support, putting them at risk of mental health issues.

Males—who make up the vast majority of the construction workforce—are also acknowledged to be at particular risk of suicide. Although attitudes are slowly changing, the typical approach is to try to deal with issues alone and not ask for help.

Research has shown all levels of seniority face mental health issues, but low-income workers may lack adequate resources to access necessary support.

Small margins, meanwhile, put an intense focus on the bottom line. This, in turn, promotes the use of business methods and construction practices that demand compliance with ever more stringent productivity and safety standards.

Even when these pressures are managed in an enlightened way, issues of

health and wellbeing can be difficult to address at the sub-contractor level and other lower tiers of the supply chain. The productivity drivers that ensure the lowest cost can help to create the conditions for poor mental health, with limited resources to deal with it.

Mental health issues create a wide range of challenges not only for individual employees, but also for employers. Problems include increased absenteeism, lost productivity, substance abuse, and workplace injuries and accidents.

So, what steps can be taken to promote better mental health on-site? Here are some insights:

A safe sharing space: Creating a safe, familiar space by reaching out to employees on a human level is essential. Workers are not statistics or just revenue generators, and the industry must band together to provide those lacking support with a place to come to when they need it.

Reaching out to workers regularly to understand what is affecting them physically and mentally can benefit them in the long run.

Although workforce size and time constraints can be barriers, the industry should introduce standards to ensure [mental health issues](#) are addressed directly with workers.

A change in work perception: Although working hours across industries are usually 36 to 40 hours weekly, construction workers sometimes work even longer, giving rise to undue pressure and little time for rejuvenation and recreational activities.

One possible solution is for governments to pass laws restricting working hours for on-site personnel with mandatory time-off between shifts.

Organizations can also introduce on-site makeshift recreational rooms where workers can indulge in activities such as gaming or painting to take their minds off work. The productivity gains have been shown to repay the investment many times over.

Diversify the workforce: The male-dominated industry must change how it is perceived by becoming more women-friendly. For example, young girls are not always encouraged to enter the construction world. As a result, the industry may not seem an attractive career option for women.

The sector needs to move away from being typecast as having men at the helm and reinvent itself as a segment that actively encourages women to be part of it. This will in turn create a more balanced and cohesive work environment, providing a chance for deserving individuals to shine.

Focus on human capital: Poor [mental health](#) is an immense waste of human potential. Human involvement is the key to world-class construction as people are best able to cope with complexity, be agile and creative, and bring skills to the table that deliver high-quality outcomes. Therefore, creating the environment for this human potential to emerge is increasingly being recognized as key.

Provided by Heriot-Watt University

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